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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SR](#)

SUBJECT: SERBIA: ONE WEEK FROM DECISION DAY, DEAD HEAT FOR ELECTION  
RUN-OFF

REF: Belgrade 93

Classified by Ambassador Cameron Munter for reasons 1.4(B) and (D).

Summary

1. (SBU) Incumbent President Boris Tadic and presidential hopeful Radical Party Tomislav Nikolic continue neck-to-neck in the run-up to the run-off for Serbia's presidency. In the days since the January 20 first round of voting, the candidates have begun to differentiate their visions for Serbia's future, with Tadic reasserting his promise to lead Serbia to European prosperity and Nikolic tying himself to parts of Serbia's less savory past. The choice may be getting clearer, but the level of democratic parties' solidarity behind Tadic is not. The initial terms for support of Democratic Party of Serbia leader PM Vojislav Kostunica and New Serbia's Velimir Ilc were too high (rejecting the SAA if the EU deploys a Kosovo mission), and Tadic rejected them with a display of resoluteness that doubtless made for an uncomfortable plane ride to Moscow for the three. After signing an energy agreement with Russia, they may find a way to kiss and make up on the ride home, or at least before round two. Tadic can win this race, but it will require a lot of heavy lifting to secure the votes he needs, and time is running out. End summary.

Serbia's February Forecast: Dead Heat

2. (SBU) Approaching round two of Serbia's presidential elections, there is general consensus that the run-off between Democratic Party (DS) Boris Tadic and Radical Party Tomislav Nikolic is too close to call. There is a lot of focus on numbers, much highly speculative. Tadic has received no formal endorsements to explain how he will pick up enough votes to retain his mandate. Nonetheless, IRI-funded pollsters who called the first round, suggest that, barring data-shaking political drama, Tadic will take Nikolic in the second round, perhaps by as little as 50,000 votes. Local politicians and analysts have similar views. In a conversation with the Ambassador on January 22, Srdjan Sapir, Tadic's campaign manager cited this number, as well. To achieve this edge, the number crunchers say, Tadic needs to get about two million votes, that is, about 600,000 more than in the first round.

No Unconditional Love

3. (SBU) Who these 600,000 voters will be is a matter of uncertainty and speculation. While opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leader Cedimir (Ceda) Jovanovic suggested on January 20 that he was willing to help Tadic, he has not formally endorsed him. Sapir told the Ambassador that the DS is counting LDP's support and, even more on LDP's foot soldiers to get out the vote, but according to party official Ivan Andric, Tadic has not asked for Ceda's help, and Ceda will not chase after Tadic to offer it.

4. (SBU) Defense Minister and DS leader Dragan Sutanovac told the Ambassador that Tadic needs an energetic get-out-the-vote campaign, especially in Belgrade, and that Jovanovic can help. He reminded us

of the bad blood between Tadic and Jovanovic that might get in the way of this. LDP has a database and phone list of over 150,000 voters, but Andric suspected that many will not come out for Tadic. Andric told emboff that the LDP governing board was heavily divided on whether to support Tadic and suspected that the membership was equally divided. He said that, to his own surprise, almost half of the board thought it would be better for Nikolic to win. Anger about Tadic's failure to deliver on his agenda drove this group, he said, along with the belief that a Nikolic win would strengthen LDP in the future. The other half, he said was willing to give some degree of support to Tadic, but had not determined how much. The fact, that once given, votes and voters were difficult to reclaim also fit into the equation, Andric said.

15. (SBU) MP Balint Pasztor, son the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians' first-round presidential candidate Istvan Pasztor, said that the Hungarians would endorse Tadic if Tadic endorsed their platform. To date, Tadic has not asked for the Hungarians' help, but, said the son, Pasztor is waiting for the call. Sapir, Tadic's campaign manager, claims Tadic has in fact made the call.

#### The Kostunica Cost: Initial Terms Too High

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16. (SBU) The announcement of a joint Tadic, Ilic, and Kostunica January 25 trip to Moscow to sign an energy agreement (reftel) led many to conclude that support for Tadic from coalition partners New Serbia (NS) and the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) was forthcoming. Deputy PM Djelic told the Ambassador on January 22 he expects that there will be a deal between Kostunica/Ilic and Tadic, and that this deal delivers the votes for a Tadic victory. On January 24, however, the media carried the first suggestions of possible terms of the deal. Headlines reported that NS and DSS had conditioned their support on Tadic's agreement to sign an annex to the governing

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coalition agreement. The annex reportedly stipulated that Serbia would rescind support for the Stabilization and Association Agreement, if the European Union deployed a mission to Kosovo. Tadic publicly refused the agreement, which he reportedly called "blackmail," maintaining that he could not turn Serbia away from Europe and return it to isolation.

17. (SBU) Political analyst Filip Medic, described this to poloff as an "impossible deal" that called into question one of the five principles of the governing coalition's agreement, namely moving Serbia along the path toward European integration. Tadic has pinned his campaign to this principle, NDI's Tom Kelly told poloff, and signing the agreement would undermine his credibility with his voters and with potential LDP supporters. Medic, Kelly, and others with whom we spoke, however expect Tadic to come to terms with Kostunica and Ilic.

18. (SBU) Some analysts suggest that other terms for Kostunica's support are also too high and could cost Tadic support and the election. Milan Pajevic, analyst, advisor to Economy Minister Dinkic on January 22 told the Ambassador was disgusted by the DS's agreement to go along with DSS plans to sell NIS and gas concessions to the Russians. Not only was it a bad deal for Serbia, but it was not transparent and only contributed to the accusations of corruption that swirl around Tadic and the DS, Pajevic said.

#### Packaging the Candidates

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19. (SBU) Veran Matic, CEO of B92, told the Ambassador on January 23 that the Radicals clearly had a good campaign manager trying very hard to soften the image of Nikolic, to make him presentable. That was clearly dangerous. Matic was not impressed with the campaign of Tadic so far. Even now, he said, Tadic's campaign was trying to use negative campaigns under "false flags" (he gave the example of ads attacking Nikolic put forward by Vojvodina liberals - these ads were illegal because the law forbade ads when that party's candidate was not running. Matic thought Tadic should just come out and own up to the ads, himself). Matic himself believed that there was a limit to the amount of mud Tadic should sling. It had to be targeted and not

backfire on him. But there were simply not that many days left before the second round now - Tadic had given Nikolic a free pass over the last month and Nikolic had used that time to redefine himself as someone not so scary. Matic was sad to see that so many people in Serbia were able to, and willing to, forget what had happened in the 1990s (when Nikolic and his ilk had served in Milosevic's government).

#### Defining Moments

¶10. (SBU) Ivan Vejvoda, head of the Balkan Trust NGO and advisor to Tadic and other democratic leaders, also wished Tadic would profile himself better and draw a distinction between himself (the future) and Nikolic (the past). Since the first round, Tadic appears to be following this advice. New Tadic television spots and billboards show Tadic among crowds of youth (as opposed to alone behind a podium, as earlier spots did) and underscore the European Integration agenda. Pollsters and political analysts have high hopes for a boost in Tadic support that, they say, would follow the signing of a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) that many locals hope will take place on January 28. This would be the major accomplishment of Tadic's first term and signal the road to prosperity that focus groups indicate is voters' primary concern. Our interlocutors appeared surprised and alarmed to hear that this was far from a done deal. Ivan Vejvoda was just one of several who told the Ambassador that not signing would be devastating for Tadic and to his voters.

#### Radicals: True Colors

¶11. (SBU) Nikolic and supporters may reduce the need for Tadic to run a negative campaign, having begun to expose the tougher radical positions of the Party themselves. Media made much of Nikolic promises to review certain criminal convictions, including that of former Prime Minister Djidjic's assassin. Matic told the Ambassador that much of what motivated Nikolic supporters was a "Yugonostalgia" rather than a real east v west battle. They wanted an idealized situation which they recalled from before the wars of the 1990s, where Yugoslavia was independent, respected, and prosperous. What disturbed Matic was not that old people believed this, but some young ones as well. Radical Party leader Seselj, on trial in the Hague, announced support for Nikolic, calling him "the future president of Serbia," and, as much as the endorsement of a war crimes indictee might play poorly in the West, in Serbia, analysts say, it plays well among the faithful.

¶12. (SBU) The thought of a Radical president frightens others, however. Matic believed that on the actual day of the elections many people would be horrified by the prospect of a Radical victory and would do the right thing ("not for Tadic, but against Nikolic"). He

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asked if this was enough for Tadic to win given the high turnout of the first round, Matic said, there are many who did not vote the first time - they were just too busy. Now it matters.

¶13. (SBU) Ivan Vejvoda expressed measured and careful optimism, in a conversation with the Ambassador, January 22. Vejvoda believes that people will simply wake up and not vote for Nikolic, but the Tadic campaign must work much harder to make this obvious to them.

#### Comment

¶14. (SBU) Tadic is gambling that Kostunica will carry the day for him, and, if he is able both to continue to avoid deals that would pull the planks out of his platform and to get DSS and NS votes, the calculation will pay off. If not, posing pictures with Putin risks losing the Liberals for no good purpose.

¶15. (C) The sharpening of the differences between the candidates likely works in Tadic's favor, and Tadic needs to make use of opportunities like an agreed upon, but yet unscheduled debate and stumping around the country to highlight them. With time running

out, the DS must turn out all democratic voters, again, mobilizing the DS faithful, convincing those who supported other candidates out of disappointment with Tadic to give him a second chance, and, for those who didn't vote at all, converting fear of the morning after a Nikolic win into a vote for Tadic. The polls favor Tadic to pull it off; now the Pals have to get to work.

MUNTER